



DRAMATHERAPY: RITUAL METAMORPHOSED

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ABSTRACT

This overview of literature tries to demonstrate how modern day dramatherapy practice evolved from ancient theatrical practices. Literature reveals the contribution of early dramatists, especially, from the Greek and Roman periods, encouraging spectators to watch comedies, as a remedy for psychosis. The early beliefs in relation to the curative potential of drama were exploited by the modern day dramatists, educationists, sociologists, and psychiatrists, to experiment further in formalizing the practice of drama as therapy. These practitioners were able to elicit vital elements in drama and theatre, and combine with theory, in order to make dramatherapy a unique discipline in the field of mental health. Today, dramatherapy is the application of diverse elements related to drama and theatre, to address manifold psychological issues, either from a clinical point of view, or from a humanistic perspective.

This paper focuses on how modern day dramatherapy practice evolved from ancient theatrical practices. The Greek and Roman contributions were of importance to understand the early beliefs in relation to the curative potential of drama. Also, they were the guiding thoughts for the modern dramatist to search therapy within their practice. Eliciting the vital processes of drama and theatre, to heal the psychologically wounded people, therefore, is the current practice of dramatherapy.

Greek ritual metamorphosed to a formal theatrical practice by 534 B.C. It was Thespis, an Ancient Greek poet, who was the first person to appear on stage as an actor playing a character in a play. He took this giant step, but was found guilty by Solon, the legislator who witnessed Thespis acting.

He queried him why so much 'lies' were told before such a number of people. In reply Thespis said that it was no harm to do so in a play¹. Hence, Thespis transcended 'reality' by making use of his 'theatrical' space to cause either laughter or sorrow.

According to Aristotle, the art of tragedy has a cleansing effect. He explains a tragedy as a complete story featuring high-stakes circumstances. Tragedy must also be told through pleasing language, and performed on stage rather than read. Finally, 'through pity and fear,' the audience should leave feeling cleansed emotionally (catharsis)².

It is evident that the ability to effect a "catharsis" in the individuals of an audience is one of the crucial requirements of a well-constructed tragedy. Moreover, it is clear that the cathartic effect of a tragedy will produce an "appropriate pleasure" of a certain kind. The appropriate method of bringing about the emotions of pity and fear (and the corresponding kind of "tragic pleasure") is through a certain depiction of the relationships between friends and relatives." "We see in the case of the sacred songs," says Aristotle in his Poetics, "that while usually their effect upon the mind is a sort of intoxication, yet when they are heard by persons in ecstasy, these are calmed, as though they had gone through a medical cure and a catharsis"³

Unfortunately, Aristotle's Poetics (or any of his other works) reveal no thorough examination of this concept of catharsis. This has resulted in diverse interpretations of Aristotle's concept of catharsis. Today, Tragic catharsis has been interpreted as a process of either (or some combination of) (1) purgation, (2) purification, or (3) cognitive stimulation.

In the early periods, the physicians saw the value of drama as a therapeutic tool. A second century Roman by the name of Soranus was of the view that to cure mentally ill patients they must be exposed to peaceful surroundings where plays are read, discussed, and even participate in the productions. In this manner the physician thought that their thinking could be sequenced and even depression could be managed⁴. Another Roman, Caelius Aurelius went a step further, and in his treatise On Acute Diseases

1 Nagler (1952) p. 3.

2 Aristotle, Poetics, I.14, 1453b 8-13.

3 Cassirer (1979) pp. 198-199.

4 Cockerham (2000).

and on Chronic Diseases, states that to achieve emotional balance, patients should visit the theatre. His thought was that by enabling the patient to visit theatre, his emotions would be countered by the opposite emotions. So for treatment of depression one must see a comedy. For mania or hysteria one has to watch a tragedy⁵.

The therapeutic potential of drama was visible throughout the history of theatre and dramatists looked at it with certain vitality. Brecht who was anti-Aristotelian used his epic theatre to help the spectator to explore his thoughts and actions and generate new states of mind and behaviours; reinforcing new political and social connections, and new understandings of themselves and others⁶. The dramatic expression brought by Brecht as well as others (Eve Ensler's Verbatim Theatre and Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed') helped to promote discussion, provoked socio-cultural traditions, and made the stage available for neglected or marginalized groups of individuals and ideas.

Long before Brecht, many other dramatists worked as social activists in order to bring social reforms. In 1889, Jane Adams implemented theatre activities to help immigrants to socialize and build social connections. Her drama activities were termed as 'Lines of Activity' which included courses, lectures and group experiences that brought culture, education and social connection. The skits produced in her drama clubs enabled the participants to share their experiences⁷.

Neva Boyd was another active sociologist who helped children to improve their skills on language learning, problem-solving, confidence building and social skills. She commenced Recreation Therapy and Educational Drama movements in the United States. Dramatherapy emerged when Boyd's techniques were further developed by her student Viola Spolin⁸.

Spolin's influence towards theatre as education encouraged drama therapists to explore on many therapeutic processes that are of benefit to young children. Such exploration did not stop with educating children but extended towards other communities in

5 Jones (1996).

6 Ranasinha (2013) pp. 16-17.

7 Jackson (2001).

8 Spolin (1963).

an intentional manner, and drama therapy took its roots as a force of social change.

In 1945, for the first time, the term dramatherapy was used in print by Lewis Barbato⁹. However, it was the Viennese actress Gertrud Schattner who popularized the term dramatherapy and provided the impetus to create a national institution in the United States¹⁰. Gertrud together with her husband Edward, a psychiatrist working with refugees and survivors of Nazi concentration camps, were able to work with people under utter desperation, depression and despair. It was Edward who invited Gertrud to work in the sanatorium to do drama, storytelling and poetry to bring those people back to life. Initially, Edward failed in healing the hearts of those people, even though he healed the bodies. When Gertrud joined him, her activities were unique, which she called dramatherapy¹¹. Her untiring efforts finally paved way for the forming of the National Association for Dramatherapy in the US in 1979.

The European roots of dramatherapy can be found in the work of Peter Slade who introduced the new modality to British Medical Association way back as 1939. It was he who coined the term 'dramatherapy', that resultant from his work with emotionally disturbed children¹². Slade supported them to improve physical control, confidence, observation skills, and abilities to be tolerant and considerate towards others. In a pamphlet entitled 'Dramatherapy as an Aid to Becoming a Person', he speaks of what he and others were trying to achieve¹³. Another early pioneer, Sue Jennings, called her work 'remedial drama'¹⁴. Later, she focused on ritual and started to refer her experiments as 'dramatherapy'¹⁵.

According to Phil Jones¹⁶, the Russian dramatist Nicholai Evreinov created a method called Teatrotherapy which focused on the internal and psychological processes involved in acting to create healing and well-being in participants and help them

9 Casson (2004).

10 Reiter (1996) pp. 1–3.

11 Schattner & Courtney (1981).

12 Langley, D. (1995/6) 'An interview with Peter Slade, Dramatherapy 17 (3): 2–6.

13 Jones (1996).

14 *ibid.*

15 *ibid.*

16 *ibid.*

re-frame or re-imagine their difficulties into a new way of life. Another attempt was made by Vladimir Iljine who used theatre games and improvisational training to encourage flexibility, spontaneity, expressiveness, and communication abilities. This was before the Russian Revolution, and his methods were used with individuals and groups under many situations and locations such as psychiatric patients, people with emotional unrest and performers in the theatre. Sally Bailey¹⁷, a prominent dramatherapist from the US, records storytelling techniques utilized by the Russian Nikolai Servevich Govorov to help psychiatric patients and others develop social connections, self-confidence, and socially appropriate behaviour.

Russian dramatist Constantin Stanislavski's experiments made theatre a psychological art. His actor training methods have become strong tools in the hands of educators and professionals of psychotherapy¹⁸, who deal with the emotional aspect of a person. His theory of Magic IF is the core of much research connected with neurology and brain processes that attempts to see the connection between body and mind¹⁹.

A name that we cannot avoid when discussing dramatherapy is Jacob Levy Moreno who created psychodrama, sociodrama and sociometry²⁰. Moreno, as a physician (1889), developed sociometry; a method of assessing the social choices made within a group by its members and then intervening in a systematic way to create social change²¹. Using role play and improvisation he tried to help displaced people and people who were destitute. Later this practice came to be applied on those with serious personal, emotional and social issues and was named psychodrama. Psychodrama has become part of the dramatherapy toolbox, and therefore all that was experimented by Moreno has become a wealth for a dramatherapist.

Practitioner Phil Jones states that 'dramatherapy is involvement in drama with a healing intention. (It) facilitates change through drama processes... to express and work through problems ... or to maintain

17 Bailey (2009).

18 Blair (2002) pp. 177–190.

19 Ranasinha (2013) p. 15.

20 Lewis & Johnson (2000); Ranasinha (2013) pp. 134–139.

21 Lewis & Johnson (2000) pp. 162–195.

a client's well-being and health²². Sue Jennings as a pioneer defines dramatherapy as, "the specific application of theatre structures and drama processes with a declared intention that it is therapy."²³

In order to support their theses, they looked into the field of Educational Drama and saw how new cognitive networks can be established with the power of the dramatic processes; and how the participants are made to experience significant change and transformation with such processes. These practitioners worked within a pedagogic paradigm and developed a theoretical model of the way the process worked to bring about the desired change in the person.

Thus the focus of dramatherapy offered a clinical practice on the 'client' who regularly attends therapy sessions, to work seriously and hard on his problems, until the 'client' no longer needs this support and is relieved of his symptoms. However, the usefulness of dramatherapy is not confined to the medical conditions, and to regard it as a treatment for specific psychiatric conditions is seriously to limit its value by ignoring its flexibility. The flexibility of dramatherapy comes from the fact that it is based on a fundamental human principle—the way in which we use imagination to transform and humanize the world we live in²⁴.

In conclusion, drama as therapy was recognized since the classical times, and evolved in the hands of dramatists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and educationists. Many ways in which drama and theatre processes could be utilized for the wellbeing of psychologically wounded people have been tested throughout the human history. Such studies, today, validates dramatherapy as a unique discipline, in the field of mental health.

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22 Jones (1996).

23 Jennings (1994).

24 Anderson-Warren & Grainger (2000) p. 218 & 222.